

# Caste in the United States

A Survey Of Caste Among  
South Asian Americans

Equality Labs





# EQUALITY LABS

Equality Labs works at the intersection of education, art, community research, and technology to support South Asian religious, ethnic, and cultural minority movements dealing with intractable systems of oppression. Equality Labs is the first South Asian American human rights and technology start-up whose leadership is centered around women, gender non-conforming, trans, and queer people.

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**Equality Labs**

**2018**



***“If Hindus migrate to other  
regions on earth, Caste would  
become a world problem”***

**Statesman, Civil Rights Leader, and  
Author of India’s Constitution**

**Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, 1916**



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# Introduction

**T**his is the first comprehensive survey that details the extent to which Caste<sup>1</sup> has embedded itself in the United States.

Increasingly, Caste has become a matter of considerable weight in South Asian diasporic communities. This report aims to address the issue at its core, through both an examination of the history of Caste in the United States diaspora, as well as an examination of its current impact through our survey. Our aim is to better understand the full spectrum of Caste experience in the South Asian American immigrant community in 2017 so that our communities can work towards caste equity together.

To understand the implications of this report we want to ground the opening of this document with some crucial concepts.

## Who is a South Asian American?

The term **South Asian American** encompasses peoples of several different national, religious, tribal and Caste affiliations. We come from one of the most populous regions of the world, that includes India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Tibet, Maldives, and the Caribbean. We are the fastest-growing major ethnic group with over 4.3 million South Asian Americans who live in the U.S. Our largest populations are situated in California, New York, New Jersey, Texas, Illinois, and the Carolinas. The rapid growth of the South Asian American population, and communities of color as a whole, is expanding perceptions about who and what is *American*, while also challenging the institutions that decide who is afforded the rights and protections of the nation's laws.<sup>2</sup>

Within the context of mainstream American society, South Asian Americans are often racialized as “*brown*”. Most assume that we are all “Indian” and “Hindu”- terms that assume, not only Indian national origin, but reduce South Asian Americans immigrants to only those practicing the Hindu faith. This simplifies the rich diversity of our community, homogenizing South Asian American immigrants who either come from other South Asian countries of origin, or even more poignantly, those who are survivors of the violence of Caste apartheid (as explained below) and religious fundamentalism. This includes Dalits<sup>3</sup>, Adivasis<sup>4</sup>, and other Caste-oppressed immigrants, who then go on to endure multiplied systems of bias including casteism, racism, and religious fundamentalism. This is why Caste-oppressed immigrants will either chose to identify by their Caste, as in the case of Dalit-Americans, or



by their religious identity.

In this context, it is important to understand that religious identity in South Asian Americans communities can also be closely linked with Caste. This is because many non-Hindu religious traditions in the subcontinent emerged as a challenge to Caste, including Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Ravidassia faiths. Many Christian and Muslim South Asians also converted to these faiths to escape Caste and gain access to education, business, and political representation - all of which were traditionally reserved for the “upper” Castes by Hindu scriptures.

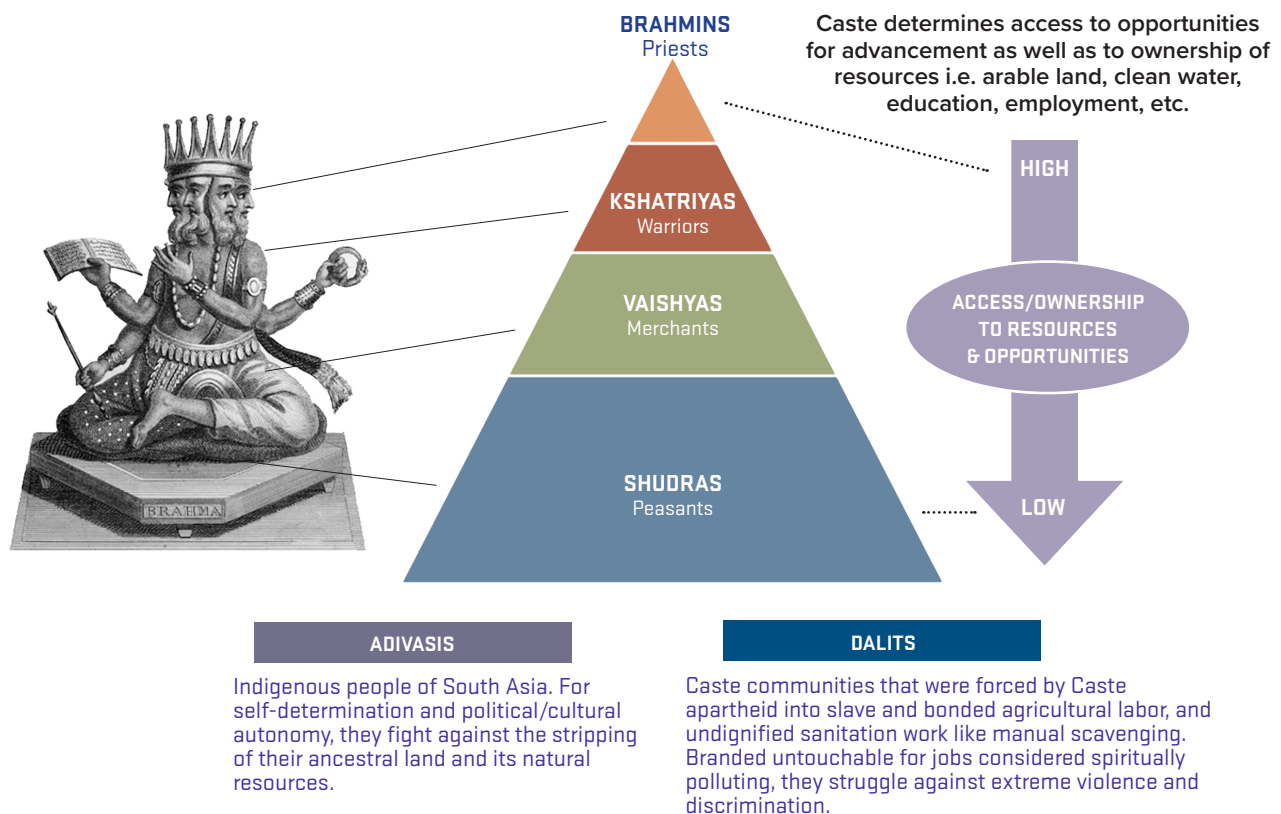
Therefore, the challenge for equity within South Asian American immigrant networks is to understand how our communities must grapple with both racism *and* our internal structures of Caste hegemony.

## What is Caste Apartheid?<sup>5</sup>

The word “Caste” itself stems from the Spanish and Portuguese “*casta*”, which means “race, lineage, or breed.”<sup>6</sup> It was applied by white colonials during the 17th century C.E. to refer to the system of social codification they witnessed existing in South Asia. The native terms for Caste are often “*varna* (Caste group)” and “*jati* (Caste)”. Each Caste group encompasses within it several individual Castes varying in cultural and social practices, and who are limited from structural power by their placement within the pyramid.

**Caste apartheid<sup>7</sup>** is the system of religiously codified exclusion that was established in Hindu scripture. Hindu origin myths state that different people were created from different parts of God Brahma’s body and were to be ranked hierarchically according to ritual status, purity, and occupation. By this system, everyone at birth, is ranked with a Caste. Crucially, *Caste is inherited from the family one is born into and is unalterable throughout that person’s life.*

Figure 1: Caste as a Socio-religious Structure



There are four main Caste groups. Those at the very top are *Brahmins*, who have traditionally been priests, scriptural knowledge-keepers, and legislators. Below them in status are the *Kshatriyas*, who were kings and warriors. They are followed by *Vaishyas*, or the merchant classes. People in these three Caste groups are often referred to as the “upper” Castes. Those at the bottom of the Caste hierarchy are *Shudras* or traditional peasants. Many of the lowest ranking *Shudras* are also termed Caste-oppressed.

Outside the four Caste group structure are people considered lower than the lowest of Castes. They go by the term *Dalit* meaning “broken but resilient”, formerly known as “untouchables”<sup>8</sup> and the *Adivasis*, or the indigenous peoples of South Asia. Together these Caste-oppressed groups continue to experience profound injustices including socioeconomic inequalities, the usurpation of their land and rights, and they also experience brutal violence at the hands of the “upper” Castes.<sup>9,10</sup>

The Caste one belongs to can determine your perceived level of ritual purity or pollution and goes on to determine the outcomes of your whole life - from where one can live and die,<sup>11,12</sup> to what one can eat,<sup>14</sup> what one’s occupation can be,<sup>15</sup> and even who one can marry.

The “*Untouchables*” in particular, are forced into a system of Caste apartheid even today. Their experience is made up of having to live in segregated ghettos, being banned from places of worship, and being denied access to schools and other public amenities including water and roads. This entire system is enforced by violence and maintained by one of the oldest, most persistent cultures of impunity throughout South Asia, most notably in India, where despite the contemporary illegality of the system, it has persisted and thrived for 2,500 years.<sup>16</sup>

## The History of Caste in the South Asian American Diaspora

It is to flee this Caste apartheid and religious fundamentalism in South Asia that many Dalits, Adivasis, and other Caste-oppressed immigrants migrated to the United States. This story is untold in many history books but is crucial to understanding the textures of our community.

Figure 2: Racist Coverage of South Asian Immigrants in 19th Century Newspapers [1]

### The Dusky Peril

Most South Asians in the United States arrived much later than other Asian immigrants from East and Southeast Asia. Of the many reasons for this, one of the key reasons was the Hindu taboo of “*kala pani*” (black water). According to Hindu religious belief, the crossing of oceans, out of the subcontinent, results in an immediate and irrevocable loss of one’s Caste. Therefore, a Caste Hindu who attempts to emigrate to another land via sea could effectively become equal to a Dalit in status. This was unthinkable to many.<sup>17</sup>







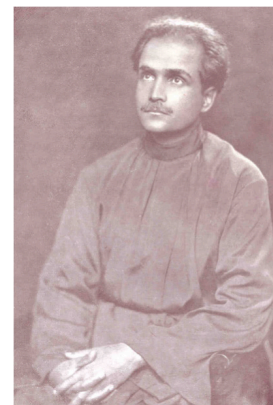
**Figure 3: Racist Coverage of South Asian Immigrants in 19th Century Newspapers (2)**

The majority of populations from South Asia who then were free to travel without fear of blasphemy were the Caste-oppressed and non-Hindus - the Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and Sikhs. So, the first wave of South Asian immigration that took place between 1897 and 1924 consisted mostly of Sikh men who were farmers and ship workers, from the state of Punjab<sup>18</sup> and who arrived on the West Coast of the United States.<sup>19</sup>

A smaller group of South Asian American immigrants included students, spiritual leaders, and other intellectuals who were mostly Caste-ediverse and interacted with members of the American intelligentsia because of their connections to universities and spiritual movements that were popular at the turn of the century. This included members of the Indian Freedom movement, the Ghadar party, and Indian members of the transcendentalism movement.

At this time, citizenship in the United States was determined by one's race. Under the Naturalization Act of 1790, only immigrants who were free white persons of "good character" could be citizens. This setup a 100+ year battle between indigenous peoples, brown immigrants, African Americans, and the U.S. government over equitable access to citizenship.

In the 1800's, the influx of Chinese labor to support the gold mines, rail road construction, and garment industry led to a wave of anti-Chinese sentiment. This resulted in racist immigration policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first law implemented to prevent a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the United States.<sup>20</sup> The ebb of Chinese labor created a demand that was then filled by South Asian immigrants.



**Figure 4:  
A.K. Mozumdar**

Despite the fact that the majority of initial immigrants were Sikh, the American press simply categorized all South Asians as "Hindoos". This ignorance began the first wave of homogenization that erased the diversity of our community. This homogenization was coupled with a racist and xenophobic propaganda campaign against South Asian Americans, branding us as the "Hindoo or Dusky Peril" that was taking American jobs and destabilizing the American way of life. This led to the paralyzing Immigration Act of 1917 which was the most sweeping immigration act the United States had passed until that time. It was the first bill aimed at restricting immigrants by imposing literacy tests, creating new categories of inadmissible persons, and barring immigration from the Asia-Pacific Zone altogether.

These immigration restrictions grew under the Immigration Act of 1924 with the intent to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity and limit immigration from "undesirable" nations by barring immigrants from specific countries. Under this Act, South Asian American immigrants failed the standards of whiteness required for citizenship and they were not seen as fit to own land, buy houses, or even bring their spouses to their new country.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 5: Bhagat Singh Thind**

## Aspiring to Whiteness through Caste Privilege

It is in the wake of these xenophobic laws that the first challenges to Indian exclusion in immigration courts began, and unfortunately the arguments of Indian immigrants for citizenship were firmly rooted in Caste.

Famously, the first cases were brought by “upper” Caste immigrants, A.K. Mozumdar and Bhagat Singh Thind, both of whom argued that they passed the whiteness test because they identified themselves as “high Caste Hindu, of full Indian blood”. They explained that because they were “upper” Caste, they had pure “Aryan” blood and that those racial origins were something that they historically shared with Caucasians.

In Mozumdar’s testimony he shares the nature of Caste and the hierarchy that prevents inter-marriage. His case was found sufficiently compelling and he became the first South Asian American who was granted citizenship. This was because his Caste identity provided evidence that sufficiently supported his claim to whiteness.<sup>22</sup>

This was later overturned and revisited in the immigration case of Bhagat Singh Thind. Thind argued that “high-Caste Hindus” should be classified as “free white persons.” He asserted that his people, the *Aryans*, were the conquerors of the Indigenous people of India and were Caucasian because of “unbroken racial and linguistic ties”.

Since the *Ozawa v. United States* court case had just defined a white person as being of the Caucasian race for the purposes of the court, Thind argued that he was a white person by contending that he too was a member of the Caucasian race. Thind also maintained that, although some racial mixing did indeed occur between the Castes, the Caste system had largely succeeded in the subcontinent at preventing race-mixing. In fact, Thind’s lawyers stated that Thind had a revulsion to marrying an Indian woman of the “lower races” asserting, “The high Caste Hindu regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American regards the Negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint.”

They felt that expressing “disdain for inferiors” would characterize Thind as being white and would characterize Thind as being someone who would be sympathetic to the existing anti-miscegenation laws in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

These two cases clearly show the dangers of homogenizing the South Asian community. Even within the South Asian community, only some can aspire to whiteness. South Asian religious and Caste-oppressed immigrants could never make the same claims to whiteness to enter the law. Their exclusion is related to their being “non-Aryan”, “not white”, and therefore, “inferior”.

This racialized perception of Caste maps anti-blackness in South Asian American communities to its origins in anti-Dalitness and anti-Adivasiness. In addition to racist perceptions of people of African origin, black people are often seen as impure similar to Dalits and Adivasis unlike white folks who, are in many ways, seen inherently as “high” Caste and therefore “casteless”.<sup>24</sup>



For these reasons, throughout South Asian Immigration histories, we find instances of “upper” Caste South Asians as eager to be associated with whiteness in order to dissociate from blackness. This even includes “upper” Caste persons like Gandhi who was famously anti-black during his time as an immigrant in South Africa. <sup>25, 26</sup>

## The Rise of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

An exception to this history of Caste supremacy and anti-blackness is the historical figure of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Dr. Ambedkar belonged to a Dalit family in India. His education was funded by early Affirmative Action programs put into place by some progressive-minded Indian princes. <sup>27</sup> Using these opportunities, he was able to study and eventually attend Columbia University in New York.

From 1912 to 1916, Ambedkar studied and lived in Harlem, in New York City, during the Harlem Renaissance, a potent time of Black consciousness and Black resistance building. As he worked on his papers on Caste and economics, he found easy friendship amongst non-South Asians, and even wrote to the great African-American intellectual, W.E.B DuBois, revealing his deep sense of solidarity with the Black struggle.

Ambedkar states that his experiences in America were defining to his life and struggles back in South Asia <sup>28</sup>, where he went on to become the leader of the anti-Caste revolution, even authoring the Constitution of a newly independent India.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar started at Columbia University a new anti-Caste legacy in the US that begins with him but also includes many more Dalit figures, like Ghadar leader Mangu Ram Mugowalia. It is from their legacy that Dalit Americans derive pride and continue the commitment to end Caste apartheid.



**Figure 6: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Graduating from Columbia University, 1919**

*“(Unlike in America) I would well anticipate the dire consequences which were sure to follow if my (Caste) identity was discovered - as it was sure to be.” - Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on return from America to the subcontinent.*

## The Brain Drain

As we move onward in history to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, race and origin related stipulations were finally removed from citizenship procedures and this resulted in a new wave of immigrants from South Asia who were professionals and students from post-Independent India. These South Asian American immigrants were largely “upper” Caste, upper class, the most educated, and came from the newly independent Indian cities.

These immigrants came seeking Western opportunities and took advantage of the American call for professional immigrants. In this wave, a small group of Dalit and other Caste-oppressed immigrants became the trailblazers for their communities as they were the first generation to benefit from Affirmative Action programs in their countries of origin. However, being small in number, they found themselves in immigration networks that were heavily caste-ist since “upper” Caste Hindus, who vastly outnumbered them, prominently carried their Caste attitudes with them. As a result, most hid their Dalit identity or stayed away from South Asian communities altogether. This led to the development of many South Asian immigrant civic, religious, and political institutions being created mostly by “upper” Caste immigrants who established “upper” Caste Hindu culture as the norm for all of South Asian immigrants. The culture, religion, and practices of Caste-oppressed immigrants were sidelined and thus the foundation for current structural Caste discrimination in the US had its roots in this wave of immigration.

After 1990, further immigration legislation allowed for the latest wave of skilled worker migrations, particularly in the tech sector. Increasingly, these migrations shifted the Caste demographics of South Asians and brought “lower” Caste populations in large numbers. This was because of several factors in South Asia including the fact that more generations in India had now benefited from Affirmative Action policies and welfare schemes. Also important was the rise in organized Caste-oppressed resistance<sup>29</sup> as well as continued conversions of Caste-oppressed peoples out of Hinduism.<sup>30</sup> These factors empowered more Caste-oppressed people and supplied them with enough upward mobility that they needed to make the move to emigrate.<sup>31, 32, 33</sup>

## The Battle for Caste in California Textbooks

As the population of South Asians continues to grow in America in a way that adds more Caste-oppressed immigrants, we can begin to see cracks appearing in the community along Caste fault lines. A key contemporary example is the issue of the California Textbook Battles.

Every seven years the State of California’s Board of Education submits its frameworks for History and Social Science for public review.<sup>34</sup> These frameworks then go on to inform textbook publishers who will write lessons to fit these frameworks. For a period between 2005 and 2016, a coalition of Hindu fundamentalist groups with a predominantly “upper” Caste membership has continued to work to contest the chapters of the framework dealing with Ancient South Asia, in particular, those that seek to illuminate the issue of Caste.<sup>35</sup> Their edits included trying to erase the word Dalit, erase the origin of Caste in Hindu scripture, while at the same time diminishing the challenges to Caste and Brahmanism by Sikh, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions. Additionally, they attempted to introduce mythical details into the history of the Indus Valley Civilization while trying to vilify Islam as solely a religion of violent conquest in South Asia. All of these arguments taken as a whole are meant to diminish the historical and present reality of Caste and its violence against Caste-oppressed communities. They are meant to absolve “upper” Caste communities of accountability for the oppression of Caste.

Dalit, Adivasi, and other Caste-oppressed communities united with Muslim, Sikh, Caste privileged allies, and Christian allies united to form a multi-faith and inter-Caste coalition that asked the California Board of Education to revise inaccurate and ideologically driven statements on Caste and the non-Hindu religions of South Asia. They argued as survivors of Caste and religious violence and spoke with passion about the need for children to learn the real history. If children do not know their past how can they be prepared to make decisions for the future?<sup>36, 37</sup> This led to a decisive victory that even at the time of publication of this report has been undermined by “upper” Caste Hindu fundamentalist lobbying groups. The fact that such a battle exists in the diaspora and is affecting mainstream American textbooks reveals the persistence of Caste and why a survey such as this is needed even more today.

# Methods

Over a period of eight months, a team of South Asian academics, anti-Caste activists, community members, and policy advocates, came together to create a survey to assess the demographics of Caste amongst South Asian Americans. In the eight months of dissemination, slightly over 1,500 people responded to the 47-question survey.<sup>38</sup>

This web-based, self-reported, self-administered questionnaire<sup>39</sup> was directed to all those in the United States diaspora identifying as “South Asian” - those having subcontinental heritage from present day Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Trinidad/Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Tanzania, and Kenya. It was open to people of different religious, political, tribal, and Caste affiliations.

The survey team distributed the online survey through direct contacts, community listservs, community organizations, immigrant organizations, South Asian religious, cultural, and linguistic networks, and social media.

The survey was hosted at [typeform.com](https://typeform.com) and was endorsed by all the major anti-Caste organizations in the United States, including the Dalit American Coalition, Ambedkar Association of North America, Friends for India’s Education, Boston Study Group, Ambedkar International Mission, International Campaign for Dalit Humans Rights, all of the U.S. Sri Guru Ravidassia gurudwaras, Dalit American Women’s Association, and Ambedkar International Center.

We want to note here that for certain communities - Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and people with long-held roots in the colonially indentured South Asian communities in Africa, Fiji, and the Caribbean, the issues of Caste are not only complex and historically interlinked, but also deeply specific to their geographies. Through this survey, we learned that in order to best gather and represent Caste information for these communities, we need to use surveys targeted particularly to their histories. We plan to follow this study up with secondary investigations on the same.

For more details on the methodology used in the survey, please see Appendix I.



# Survey Results

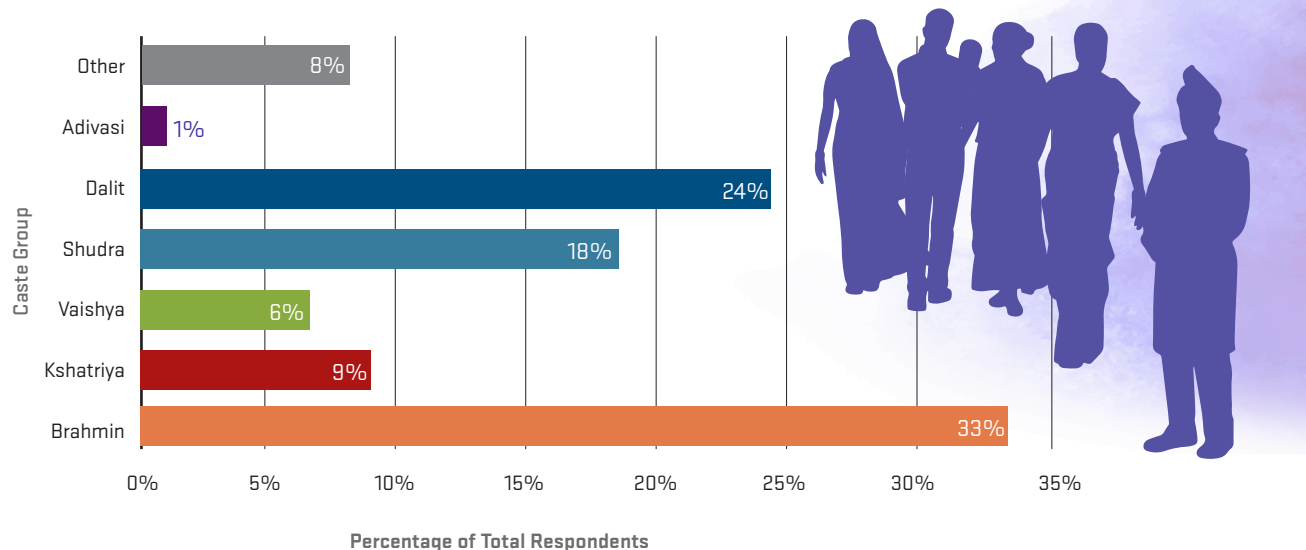
## Evidence of Caste-based Discrimination in the United States

**T**he results of our 2016 survey definitively find that all of the inequalities associated with Caste status, ritual purity, and social exclusion have become embedded within all of the major South Asian American institutions. Further, they extend into American mainstream institutions that have significant South Asian immigrant populations. This includes schools, workplaces, places of business, and religious institutions.

The following section examines in depth our data that reveals Caste attitudes and structural impacts of Caste in institutions.

Since this is the first survey aiming to map South Asians Caste-wise in the United States, no existing data exists for us to correlate our findings. However, it may be useful to note

**Figure 7: Caste Group Distribution of Respondents**



that some countries in South Asia have surveyed their populations and found that Dalits represent an average of 15-18% of the population and Brahmins, approximately 3-4% <sup>40, 41</sup>

Both of these groups have elevated representation in our survey. It is unclear whether the Caste distribution in our survey reflects the actual distribution of Caste groups of South Asians in the diaspora, or that some groups disproportionately participated.

It is possible that Dalits in the diaspora who often find themselves in the receiving end of Caste-based discriminations had more reason to place weight on the outcomes of a survey that could validate their lived experience with data. This, in combination with a number of anti-Caste organizations endorsing the survey, could have encouraged more Dalits to respond.

All the results of the survey, have nevertheless, been normalized to the total number of respondents in each group so that biases are eliminated.

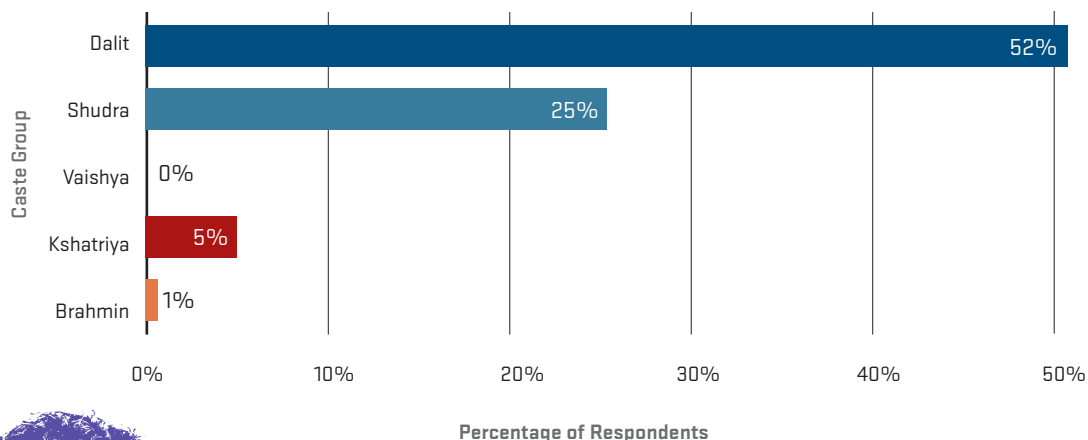
Demographics including, time since migration, education, income and land ownership, are all presented and analyzed by Caste group and presented in Appendix I.

Note that where possible, we have tried to indicate diasporic Adivasi immigrant responses. But, because of the small Adivasi sample size of only 12, we have included results in a table within Appendix IV.

## The Fear of Being Outed

Many South Asians who identify as being from the “lower” Castes – especially Dalits, Adivasis, and Shudras – tend to “hide their Caste.” This is reflected by the fact that our survey shows that those who identify as being from these Castes worry much more about being “outed.”

**Figure 8: Worried About One's Caste Being “Outed”**



*“Friends who came over to our house did not eat when they saw books on Dr. Ambedkar at my home and guessed my Caste” - A.P.*

Anecdotally, several respondents expressed significant amounts of psychological turmoil they sustained around the secrecy of their Caste. Being outed meant that they and their families could be rejected from South Asian cultural and religious spaces, lose professional and social networks, or even face bullying, abuse and violence.

This fear of being outed and its consequences can cause Caste-oppressed immigrants to remain isolated from their South Asian peers altogether.

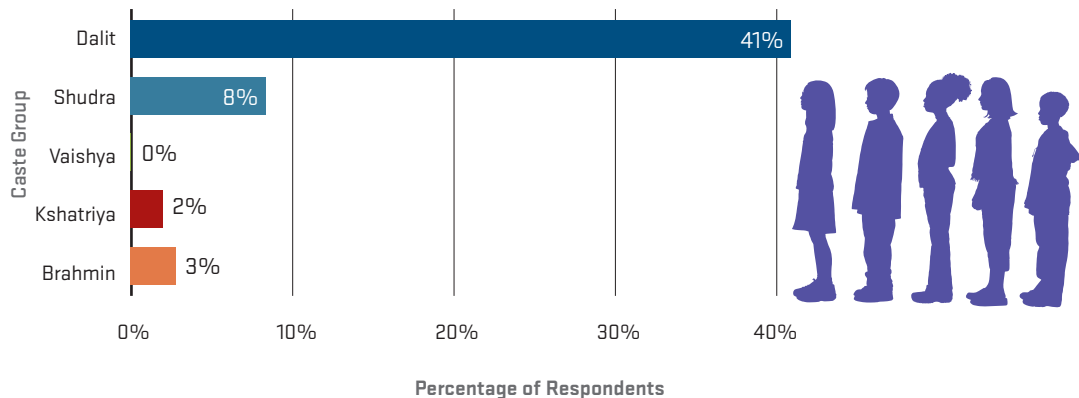
Many reported feelings of guilt for hiding their Caste and wished they could be more “brave.” Parents understood that hiding causes havoc on children in the family who do not receive a framework for why their families had such different social, cultural, economic, and religious practices from the normalized depictions of Indian “upper” Caste South Asian culture.

In these ways, Caste continues to be a significant mental health and community well-being issue in the United States.

## Caste Discrimination Exists in Schools

The issue of Caste discrimination in schools was explored in a series of questions that explored this issue in K-12 schools as well as in institutions of higher education.

Figure 9: Caste Discrimination in Schools



From the data, we see that **40% of Dalit students report facing discrimination in educational institutions in the diaspora.** In contrast, only up to 3% of respondents who were “upper” Caste report the same.



*“Most Indians in my school were upper Caste Hindus and Brahmin families, so I never felt connected to them through “Indian culture”. They would make fun of the fact that I ate meat and was Christian. In that way, my religion and family history sort of alienated me from them. I did not know it at the time but they were Brahmin... and my parents hid from me that I was Dalit. But if I had known I could have called out their Caste bullying for what it was.”*

- S.J.

Parents report that their children are treated differently in school by other South Asian students and their parents. Children growing up Dalit, Christian, Sikh, or Muslim, feel alienated by South Asian culture in white America that homogenizes all South Asian identities as belonging to an “upper” Caste Indian and Hindu culture.

*“In the United States, when my child was in second grade, she used to have play-dates with an upper Caste Hindu kid. Once the kid’s mother had come over to our house and during the course of the conversation, came to know that we follow Buddhism, which is understood to be the religion of Dalits. This was the last time that family interacted with us. Word that my family was Dalit spread like wildfire, my child became secluded from other Caste Hindu children. It angered me and it broke my heart that my child had to face the feeling of being an outcaste in the 21st century in the United States!” - T.R.*



Another area of Caste-based discrimination in schools is in institutions of higher education. Many respondents report discrimination by their fellow South Asian students. This can include discrimination in housing when some South Asian students, upon learning that their peers belong to a “lower” Caste, immediately ask to move to other living quarters, forbid cooking of non-vegetarian food, or socially exclude them from South Asian student groups and professional networking circles.

This is especially relevant in graduate schools because of the higher numbers of first and second-generation immigrants they serve.

Schools, universities and colleges need to understand that Caste dynamics exist amongst South Asian students. We hope in future versions of this survey to break out the nuances of discrimination in K-12 versus higher education so school administrators, counselors, and faculty can work with Caste-oppressed communities to ensure a safe learning environment for all.



*“I am an Adivasi student. In my undergrad in Iowa, there were many incidents where other Indian kids from rich, upper Caste and urban backgrounds, would make Casteist jokes on me. One in particular was that a few of them were planning to go to visit the local Zoo. One of them said, I don’t need to go to the Zoo to see animals, we get to see K. (myself) everyday!” - K.A.*



# Caste Discrimination in the Workplace



*“In academic and some activist feminist/anti-racist/queer circles, Caste manifests as positioning “desi” as a homogenous idea without regard to actual differences in Caste affiliations or national origin. This is performed especially to pander to Western eyes. There is some acknowledgment of diversity among activists, but in practice, many still act (out) their upper Caste privilege.” - P.R.*

One of the most striking findings of this report is the exceptionally high rates of discrimination reported by those of Caste-oppressed background in places of employment. **67% of Dalits surveyed in the diaspora reported being treated unfairly at their workplace because of their Caste. 12% of Shudras also report the same.**

To show this in contrast with other protected classes of people, data from national surveys report that approximately 40% of women experience discrimination in the workplace based on gender<sup>42</sup>.<sup>43</sup> However, unlike categories such as gender, no specific legislation exists to protect people from workplace Caste-ediscrimination. This is an area of concern that companies that work with and hire South Asian American immigrants should consider when crafting HR policies to create safe and equitable workplaces.

Employees feel that Caste is not well-understood by other Americans, feel their concerns will not be given weight, and fear being dismissed or suffering other negative consequences to their career. Ultimately, they often do not report their discrimination or correct their situation.

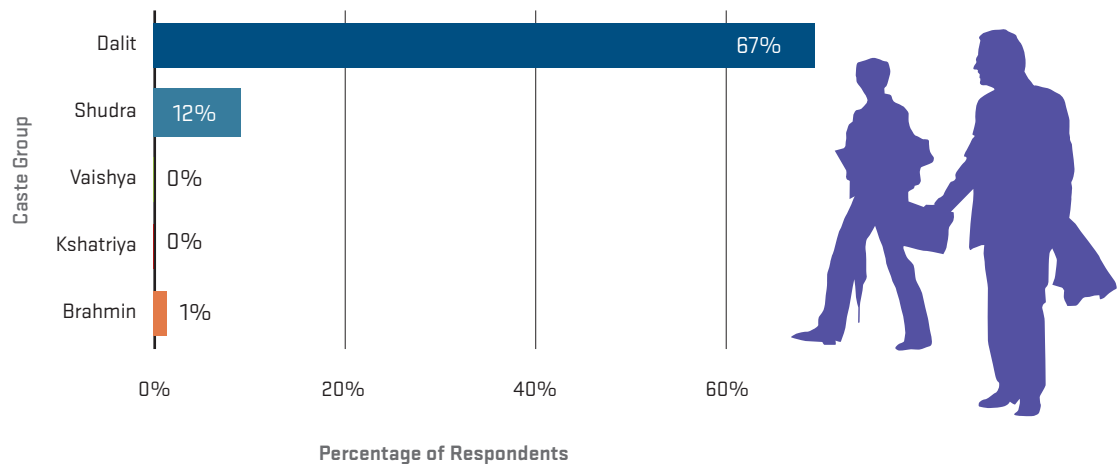


*“It becomes difficult to disclose your Caste as a Dalit and still manage to keep friends or business networks.” - A.K.*

*“I’m afraid to put in my resume that I have experience working in the field of Dalit and Adivasi rights because I think recruiters may deny me employment” - M.B.*



**Figure 10: Caste Discrimination in the Workplace**



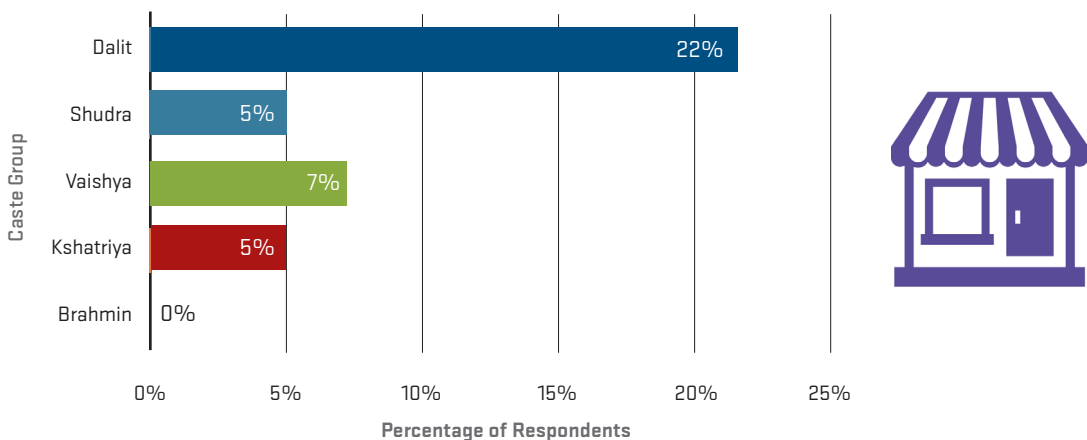


*"I had to report to HR when other South Asians in the company used Caste slurs on company forums. Would they use the N-word for African Americans, then why a Caste slur for me? I was happy I had power as a VP in my company, but what of the many who do not, what of them?" - K.V.*

## Caste Discrimination at Local Businesses

Dalits more than any other Caste-group report feeling discriminated at a place of business or service because of their Caste. This is most commonly stated to be in corporate environments, restaurants, and even in retail stores staffed or managed by other South Asians. For many Dalits, being rejected in service can be triggering and read as alluding to their perceived “untouchable” status.

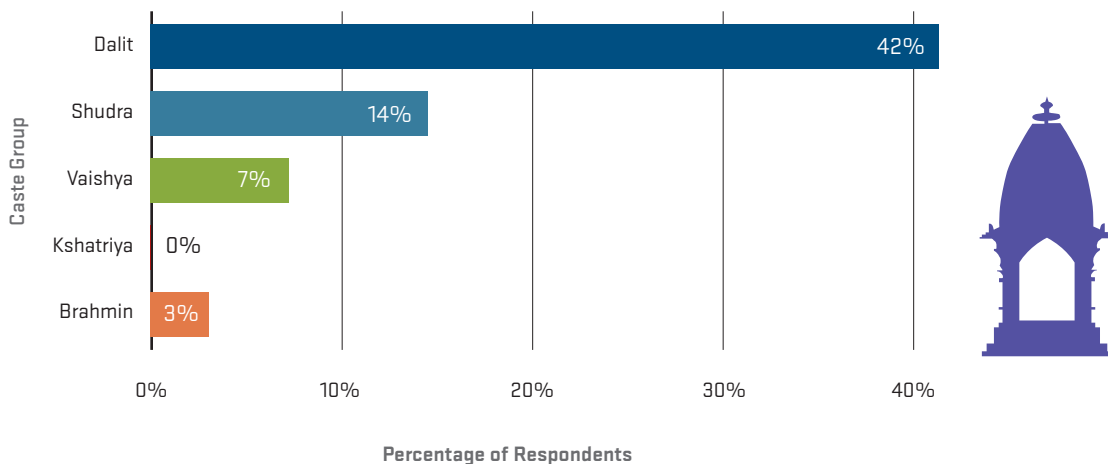
Figure 11: Caste Discrimination at Local Businesses



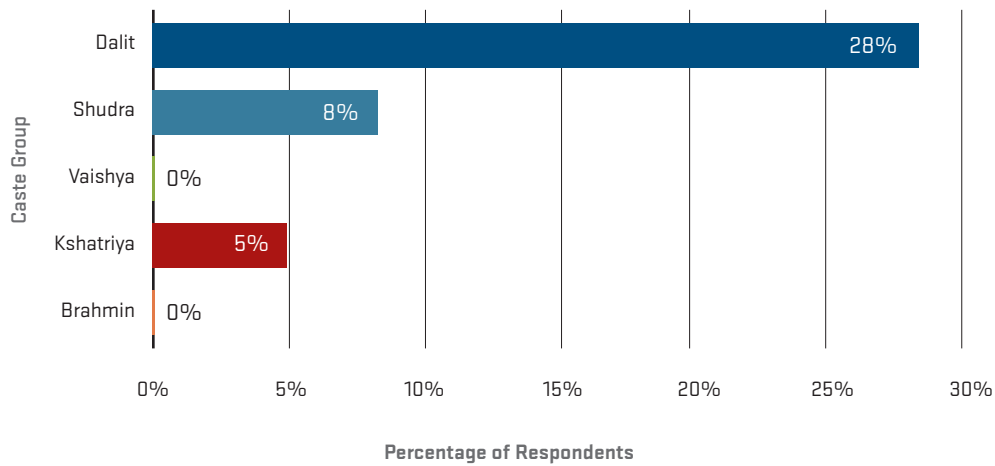
## Caste in Places of Religious Worship

Approximately 40% of Dalits and 14% of Shudra respondents reported that they were made to feel unwelcome at their place of worship because of their Caste. This data extended over a spectrum of religions including Hindu temples, Sikh gurudwaras,<sup>42</sup> churches, and mosques.

Figure 12: Caste in Places of Worship



**Figure 13: Denied leadership in places of worship**



*“In the temple especially, we see Caste. We are Shetty and thus fall as a Shudra Caste. Iyengars (Brahmins) and children of Iyengars made me feel less “cool” ... not ‘Hindu’ enough growing up...it even affects marriage prospects! My parents changed our last name growing up.” - K.N.*

*“There was one family in our bhajan (religious hymn) class that was not Brahmin and they were always made to feel left out. They quit the bhajan class shortly after.” - M.J.*



*“I was disowned by my family because I fell in love with a guy from a different Caste. My in-laws also disowned us. I lost friends. The priest at the gurudwara refused to marry me and my husband. All in the USA!” - J.A.*

Because of Hindu religious mandates, heads of places of worship are almost always male and Brahmin. But this framework has been extended into churches, mosques, and gurudwaras too.



*“The Punjabi community doesn’t include lower Caste Chamars (Dalits) in any of their social activities. Also when a lady from a lower Caste ran for public office, people actively discouraged other voters from voting for her because she was Chamar... Unacceptable...another form of racism” - P.M.*

For example, it is known within the community that many Dalit Gurdwara congregation members have since left “mainstream gurudwaras” dominated by a “Jatt” Caste leadership and established their own Shri Guru Ravidassia <sup>43</sup> (Dalit) temples of worship.

The problem of acceptance within one’s faith community is deep and existentially perplexing to many Caste-oppressed people. We ask all communities of faith within the South Asian American diaspora to take it as a moral conversation to explore how Caste discrimination operates in their institutions and move with moral clarity to remove its structural and interpersonal manifestation so that our institutions of faith can be truly open to all.

*“Everything is savarna (“upper” Caste) - dominant. Everything everyone knows about South Asian culture is savarna. So being from a Muslim Adivasi background, the erasure of my experience is something I am very used to. Erasure is just something I deal with. Otherwise, I would not even have the community I have now, the Muslim South Asian community. Socially, it’s very difficult, it’s a struggle. My culture and language are dying and my “community” has no clue and no desire to learn about it. There is no one to relate to. It is a huge reason why I suffer from depression.” - S.S.*

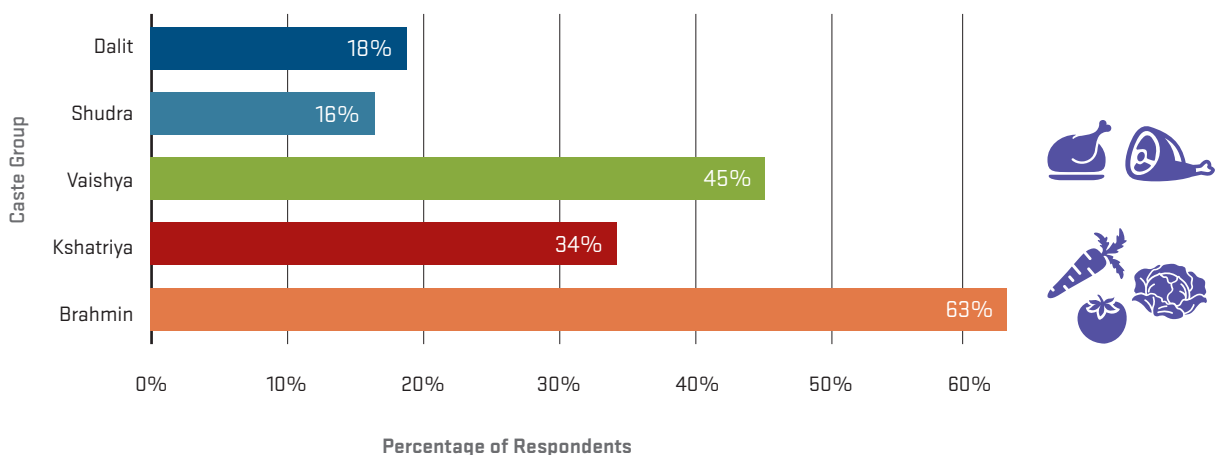


## Caste Discrimination in Food Preferences

A key issue of contention in mixed-race, mixed-Caste and South Asian spaces is the seemingly innocuous issue of food preference. While most Americans who are vegetarian or vegan understand their food preferences to be an individual choice, influenced by personal, environmental, or animal welfare concerns, vegetarianism in South Asian communities is quite different. It is deeply linked to Caste mandates and religious dictates. It can be a hot button religious and political issue.

“Upper” Caste Hindus are often vegetarian, whereas Dalit, Adivasi, and many Shudra

**Figure 14: Vegetarianism and Caste**





communities are predominantly non-vegetarian. Despite the fact that Vedic Hindus consume and enjoy meat, meat in contemporary Hindu society is associated with pollution. So “upper” Castes celebrate their vegetarianism because of their belief that it is purer.

The irony of the assignment of purity to vegetarianism and pollution to the Dalits, Adivasi, and Shudras eating meat, is that this was not a choice for some Caste-oppressed communities. Many Dalit communities, for example, were forced to traditionally work with animals, disposing of carcasses or processing animal-based products, such as leather. Their Caste-enforced proximity to animal death and meat is fundamentally the reason for their perceived “untouchability”. There is deep, inherent injustice here and this is why food preferences matter. It is now clear from the data below that Caste and food choice are linked even in the diaspora.

In the diaspora, too we observe this Caste-based food preference. **Under 20% of Dalit and Shudra respondents report being vegetarian or vegan, and this number is up to three times higher in other Caste-groups.**

It is pertinent to note here that religion is also a big influencer of vegetarianism. **An overwhelming majority (>90%) of all Muslim, Christian, and Sikh respondents in this survey reported being non-vegetarian.** This is replicated in India where these same communities are also prominently associated with eating beef and working with cow products. In fact, many Muslims and Dalits are publicly lynched in India, by Hindu fundamentalists on the very suspicion of consuming beef. Because the cow is considered a sacred animal in Hinduism, consuming beef has been banned for all other communities.<sup>44</sup>

In such volatile contexts, food preferences complicate South Asian experiences in mixed-community cultural and organizing spaces. Many of the Caste-oppressed and non-Hindu South Asians feel stigmatized in South Asian spaces and organizations that prioritize vegetarian-only meals. For it sends a message of “upper” Caste Hindu cultural hegemony. We hope that spaces that hope to invite South Asian Americans will take this point to heart and offer diversity in food choices to make all welcome.

*“We are a Shudra Caste family. At Diwali and other festival potluck parties, I am really nervous about what I cook. The “upper” Caste folks may ostracize me for bringing non-vegetarian dishes on their “auspicious” day. One time, I cooked a chicken curry and they set my dish aside, all the way on the other side of the table, in a corner and labeled it “NON-VEGETARIAN” in large letters. No one ate my curry and avoided me the whole night. I go to the parties for my kids so they won’t be isolated from their friends but I’d really rather not go altogether and I am considering that option more and more.”*  
- D.S.



# Caste Discrimination in Interpersonal Relationships

Caste adds dimensions to all interpersonal relationships. Since Caste itself is maintained by heterosexual marriage within one's own Caste community, often inter-Caste romantic relationships, in particular, heterosexual partnerships, necessitate partners navigate several complications.<sup>45</sup>

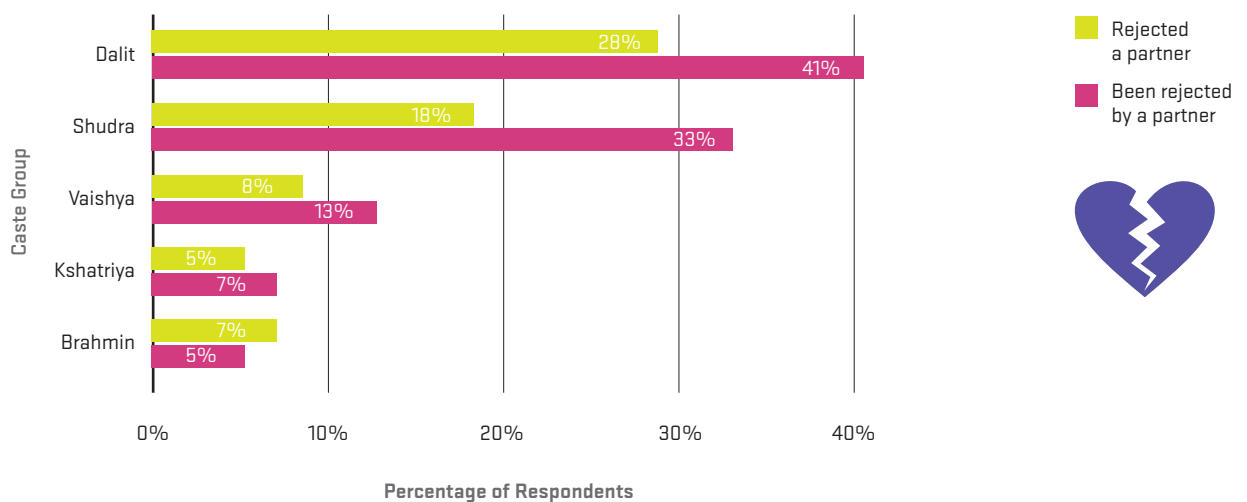
Many relationships end before they can reach their potential because of Caste disparities. A “lower” Caste partner can expect to experience discrimination, and even outright rejection at the hands of their “upper” Caste partner or partner’s family. This puts pressure on partners in a way that can be emotionally arduous.

These turbulences are multiplied when one of the partners is Dalit. Not only is there a Caste-level disparity, but a Dalit partner can be considered taboo by non-Dalit families because of the “spiritual pollution” that they are thought to bring with them.

In addition to our several anecdotal submissions on this matter, our quantitative data shows that Dalit and Caste-oppressed respondents were most often rejected from partnerships because of Caste. They are also rejecting partners based on their Caste the most. We understand both these data points to be linked together. Partners experiencing rejection based on Caste, begin to feel a need to be more discerning of further inter-Caste partnerships and therefore reject partners based on a sense of self-preservation. For example, several Dalits explained that they have or would reject an “upper” Caste partner outright because they knew they could never deal with their potential partner’s family’s treatment of them.

Despite reported rejections from “upper” Caste partners, “upper” Caste respondents from Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya Caste groups generally did not report rejecting a partner based on Caste. We hope future iterations of this survey will illuminate the problem of Caste and friendships and the experience of mixed Caste individuals as well.

Figure 15: Caste in Romantic Partnerships





*“A very educated man told me he could no longer date me because his mother wanted him to marry someone from the same Caste” - M.R.*

*“I had loved someone who was from a “lower” Caste. My parents would not accept her and mistreated her family members. Despite struggling to persuade my family members and bringing the relationship to the level of an engagement ceremony, events that happened at the engagement caused our families to be broken up. I am still saddened by the loss of my love and hate that Caste has been a major reason for our breaking up.” - V. J.*



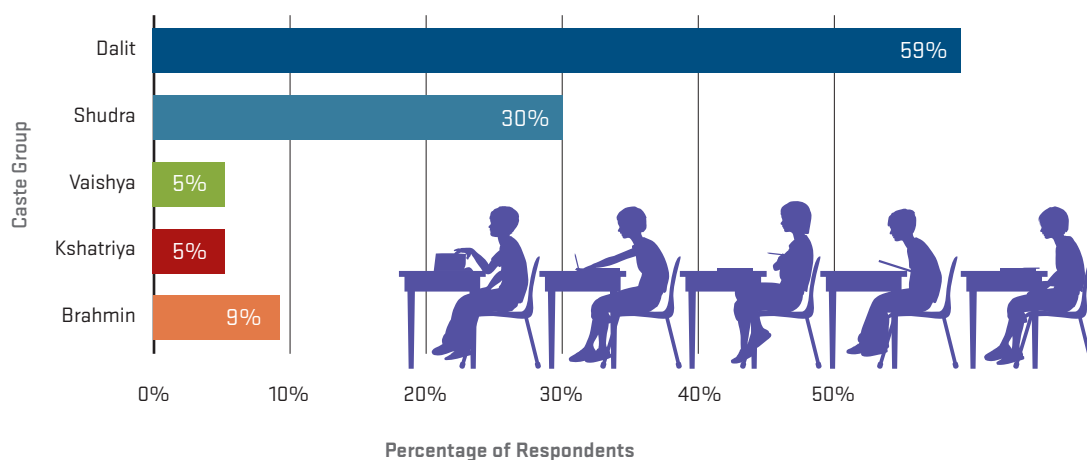
## Verbal Abuse and Physical Assault



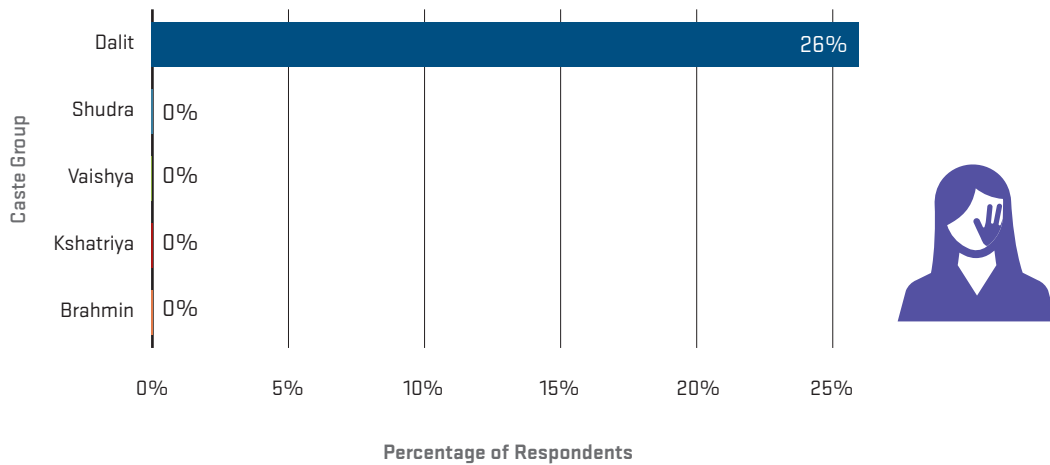
*“I clearly remember my flatmates who were “upper” Caste openly asking me my Caste and then feeling proud to say, “I can’t even think of dating you because you are from a lower Caste!”.” - R.B.*

The manifestation of Caste-based hate in the form of verbal and physical abuse is also present at higher-than-expected rates in the diaspora. **Almost 60% of Dalits report experiencing Caste-based derogatory jokes or comments.** Compare this with just 5-9% of the “upper” Castes reporting the same. The only other groups reporting this significantly were Shudras and Adivasis.

**Figure 16: Experiencing Casteist Jokes and Slurs**



**Figure 17: Experiencing Physical Assault**



Even more shocking, **26% of Dalits who responded said they had faced physical assault in the United States based on their Caste.** This number reflects that over a quarter of Dalits who responded said that they had experienced physical aggression. This is especially poignant when you consider that in comparison, no other group had reported the same at all.

This data establishes Caste as a dangerous phenomenon with repercussions that take the form of hate crimes. We take this seriously and recommend the inclusion of Caste and ethnicity in the strengthening of our existing anti-hate crime legislation that aims to protect against violence based on race, xenophobia, religion, sexual orientation, and gender.



*“Often Caste jokes are made by my colleagues without realizing my Dalit background. And they would expect I would laugh along with them because they assume I belong to a “high” Caste like themselves.” - G.B.*

*“We are a group of Chamar (Dalit) friends and when some of us Chamars tried to get leadership in our gurdwaras, we were jumped in the parking lot by a Jatt gang with knives.”*



*“In graduate school, an “upper” Caste man , on finding out that I was one of the “lower” Castes, tried to tell me that I was probably a “slut” because of that and tried to sexually misbehave with me.” - N.L.*



## Key Conclusions for Caste-based Discrimination in the United States

It is clear from the findings of this report that Caste definitively exists in the diaspora. A summary of the data shows the scope of the problem. Caste in its manifestations has structural, interpersonal, and internal consequences that we must address.



**25%** of Dalits who responded said they had faced **verbal or physical assault** based on their Caste.



**ONE IN THREE** Dalit students report being **discriminated against during their education.**



**TWO OUT OF THREE** Dalits surveyed reported being **treated unfairly** at their **workplace.**



**60%** of Dalits report experiencing **Caste-based derogatory jokes** or comments.



**40%** of Dalits and **14%** of Shudra respondents were made to feel **unwelcome at their place of worship** because of their Caste.



**20%** of Dalit respondents report feeling **discriminated at a place of business** because of their Caste.



**OVER 40%** of Dalit Respondents have reported being **rejected in a Romantic Partnership** on the basis of Caste.



**ONE IN TWO** of all Dalit respondents and **ONE IN FOUR** of all Shudra respondents **live in fear of their Caste being “outed.”**

These results reveal serious levels of discrimination and violence within our communities. The following are our immediate recommendations for the many stakeholders who work with the South Asian community.

In addition to this data, included in Appendix I is a summary of the collection of demographic data outlining income, education and other information gathered from the survey.



# Recommendations

## Schools

K-12 schools are often places where young South Asian children navigate complex identities during formative periods of their lives. Within a principally Eurocentric school curriculum, many teachers are not aware of the nuances and roots of Caste and religion in South Asian society. We recommend that in addition to educators understanding racial dynamics, they also familiarize themselves with Caste and its implications for their students.

Teachers and school administrations are also uniquely placed to be vigilant when subjects like Caste or religion are taught in the context of South Asian history and global politics. Caste-oppressed students must not be made to feel that their narrative and history of Caste is erased or misrepresented. In addition to this report itself, Appendix V contains other resources for teachers.

## Colleges and Universities

A cohort of newly immigrating South Asian students is arriving directly into institutions of higher learning. Many of these students then go on to seek professional careers and permanent residency in the United States. Some then go on to become naturalized citizens of the United States. This report reveals that these places are also some of the most Caste-ed sites for South Asian students. Students have reported a wide range of discriminations, from social exclusion to verbal and even physical assault.

We recommend that institutional disciplinary committees and international student services sensitize themselves to the issue of Caste. Anti-hazing and bullying discrimination policies for students and staff must be updated to specifically mention Caste in order to adequately reflect the reality of lived experiences on campuses. This will act as a deterrent to Caste discrimination in their institutions.

## Workplaces

For all government, corporate, and non-profits dealing with the South Asian community it is crucial that sensitivity to Caste be part of the cultural competencies required for interacting with this community.

This includes knowing and being vocal about the existence of Caste and working to prioritize the visibility of Caste-oppressed communities in programs.

We recommend that as part of their diversity workshops, HR departments get training that helps address the level of Caste discrimination in American workplaces where South Asians are present.

## South Asian Progressive Organizations:

It is crucial that the homogenizing of South Asian identity should stop. While using the South Asian category as a “race” we must also acknowledge the internal hegemonies that constrain the other minority communities within this category. These include internal hegemonies of caste, religion, geography, and faith.

The most important recommendation we can make for South Asian organizations is to ensure that organization vision and/or mission statements mention Caste explicitly, so that every progressive South Asian American community remains committed to the idea that we must fight both white supremacy and Caste apartheid in our journey towards equity for all of our communities. The erasure of Caste is no longer an option for anyone in our movements.

South Asian American immigrant networks must work then to support Caste, religious, and geographic diversity, especially the communities that are from Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Ravidassia, and Sikh backgrounds. These communities need to be involved in the shaping of South Asian conversations about equity. The process must begin with the recognition and decentering of Indian Hindu “upper” Caste experiences as the norm, ensuring that policy advocacy, organizing, and outreach events are inclusive. Immigrant networks must also expressly mention communities often marginalized through Caste and religion.

We also encourage South Asian American organizations to organize cultural events that celebrate this diversity in communities, and not narrow our South Asian experience to marking only Hindu festivals as our marker of cultural solidarity. In particular, we recommend de-prioritizing celebrations of faith holidays as a way to acknowledge the plurality of our communities’ experiences.

South Asian immigrant networks must stop replicating Caste privilege through food, religious, relationship, and social locators. Especially in the context of ongoing violence in South Asia against Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities, we advise deep sensitivity on these all fronts.

## Religious Institutions

Despite origins in Hinduism and Hindu scripture, Caste is not just a Hindu problem. All of our South Asian religious organizations in the United States must commit to the eradication of Caste-based division amongst our leadership and our memberships.

Our missions, boards, ceremonial, charitable, and values processes must explicitly maintain that Caste-based discrimination will not be tolerated.

We strongly recommend the setting up of infrastructure for the reporting and management of Caste-based discrimination cases within our religious institutions.

Religious institutions must commit to ensuring that a place of worship is wholly welcoming to all seeking God.



# Conclusion

**A**s the Caste spectrum of immigrants in the U.S. has experienced profound changes in the past 20 years, we must continue to understand the dimensions of Caste and provide for the safety and well-being of all South Asians in the diaspora.

U.S. Institutional leaders, civic leaders, educators, policy makers, and community organizers must recognize the heterogeneity in the community and resist attempts to paint South Asians with a broad brush. Recognition of the prevalence of Caste - often hidden in plain sight in the diaspora - is the first and most critical step that must be taken before the challenge of addressing discrimination and erasure can be addressed.

The South Asian American community is uniquely situated to redeem the errors of history as well as set the tone for a progressive conversation around Caste in the United States and in solidarity with grassroots Ambedkarite anti-caste movements in our countries of origin. This is an opportunity we must not squander.

We hope that the data in this report tells the stories we haven't always heard in our communities and inspires intentional efforts to create spaces that reject harmful and discriminatory ideologies. Instead, we hope this report opens new opportunities for dialogue, accountability, and most of all justice in all of our communities.



## APPENDIX I

# Caste in the Diaspora Demographic Analysis

In this section, we use results from the survey to map Caste-wise the general demographic markers of South Asians in the United States.

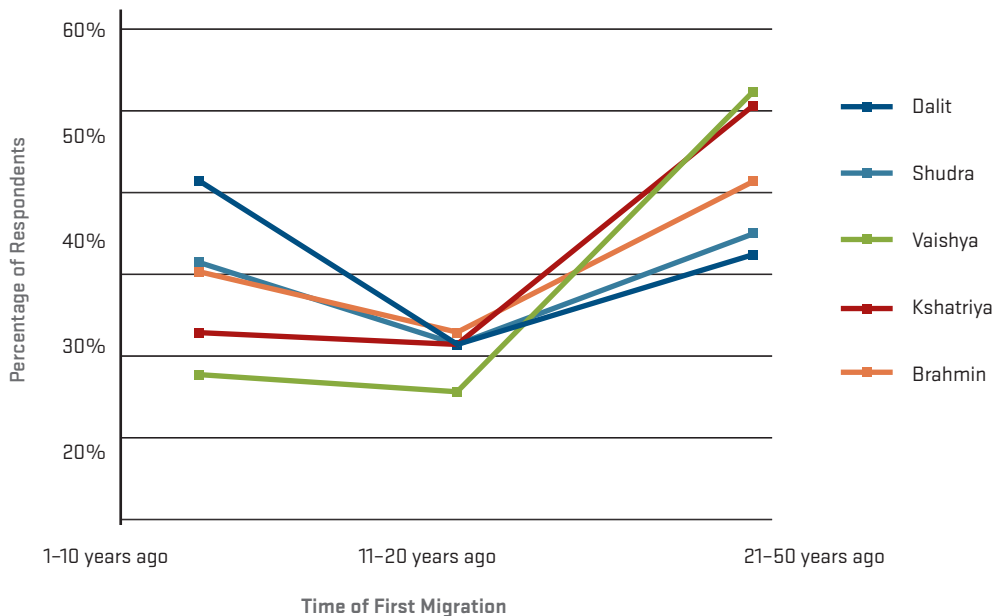
The survey sampled respondents largely from 18-49 years of age. We understand this to be a reflection of the general demographics of South Asian Americans.<sup>46</sup>

The gender and sexuality spreads of respondents can be found in Appendix II.

## Time Since Migration

We believe that one of the reasons for the issue of high representation of Brahmin respondents could be representative of elevated numbers of Brahmin immigrants in the American diaspora. “Upper” Caste immigrants have had an earlier start on their migration processes possibly supported by family wealth, education and Caste privilege in South Asia.<sup>47, 48, 49</sup>

**Figure 18: Time of Migration to the United States**



A majority of migrants arriving from 20-50 years ago were Brahmins, Vaishyas and Kshatriyas. These migrants have had a relative lead on the Caste-oppressed groups. However, our results show that Dalit and Shudra migrations are steadily increasing with Dalits reporting the most recent migrations.<sup>50</sup>

As the Caste distribution of South Asians diversifies with increasing Caste-oppressed inclusions, we anticipate that Caste itself will become a factor of increasing importance within our communities.

## Household Income

**Table 1: Household Incomes of South Asian Immigrants by Caste**

|                        | Brahmin | Kshatriya | Vaishya | Shudra | Dalit |
|------------------------|---------|-----------|---------|--------|-------|
| \$250,000 or more      | 5%      | 4%        | 8%      | 5%     | 2%    |
| \$100,000 to \$249,999 | 35%     | 33%       | 18%     | 26%    | 25%   |
| \$50,000 to 99,000     | 25%     | 25%       | 22%     | 26%    | 24%   |
| \$25,000 to \$49,999   | 22%     | 17%       | 24%     | 17%    | 17%   |
| Less than \$24,999     | 13%     | 20%       | 29%     | 26%    | 32%   |



Indian and Pakistani immigrants taken together have been reported to make a high median household income of over \$100,000 per year in the United States. This is not true for all people of South Asian background. For example, Bangladeshi immigrants report some of the lowest median incomes regardless of race or national background. Caste segregated data also informs us of existing gradations within these communities.

Approximately a fourth of respondents from each Caste group make between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year. However, some factors do stand out:



**30%** of **Dalits** in the diaspora are still **making less than \$24,999 a year.**



**25%** of the members of the **Shudra, Vaishya and Kshatriya** Caste groups **make less than \$24,999 a year.**



Only **10%** of **Brahmins** make less than \$24,999 a year

# Educational Attainment

**Table 2: Educational Attainment Across Caste**

|   | Brahmin | Kshatriya | Vaishya | Shudra | Dalit |
|---|---------|-----------|---------|--------|-------|
| Four-year college                       | 45%     | 19%       | 39%     | 22%    | 12%   |
| Graduate school                         | 23%     | 36%       | 19%     | 30%    | 31%   |
| High school                             | 6%      | 9%        | 13%     | 7%     | 5%    |
| Post-graduate                           | 26%     | 35%       | 30%     | 40%    | 49%   |
| Trade/technical/<br>vocational training | 1%      | 1%        | 0%      | 1%     | 3%    |



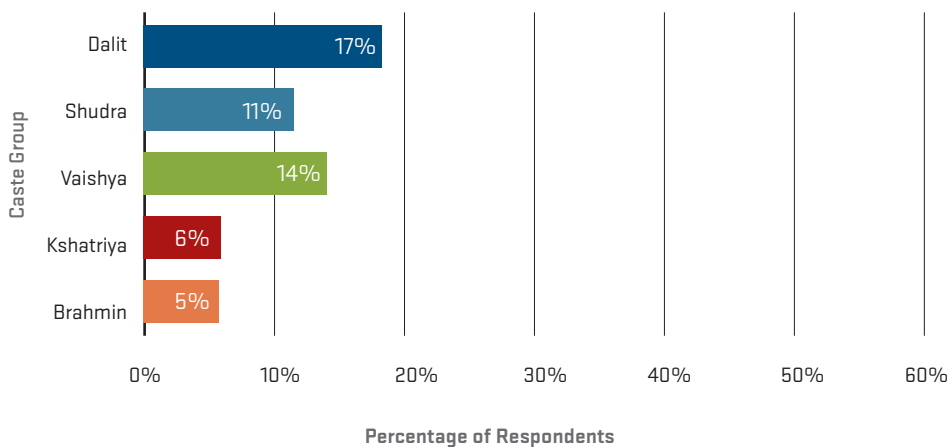
In the United States, there exists a strong correlation between educational attainment and income.

Interestingly, despite being low level earners, almost half of Dalits and Shudras surveyed reported that their educational attainment was in the postgraduate level. Of all the Caste groups, Dalits also reported the highest rates of first generation learning.

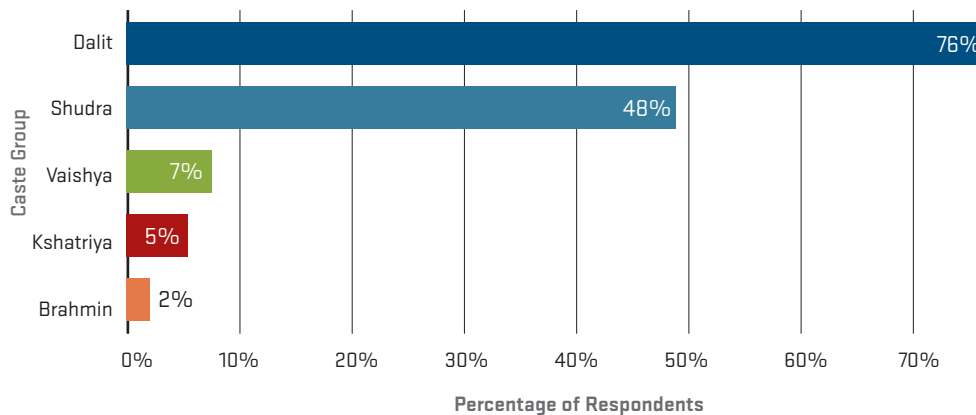
Why then do highly educated demographics translate to low incomes for Dalits?

We believe that many Dalits seeking success are seeking success outside of India to try to overcome Caste barriers. Their approach to immigration has been to enter as students, at mostly the graduate and post-graduate levels. Reported incomes then most likely reflect stipends and fellowships afforded by their institutions. Their participation in our survey reflects the aspirations of our community and how under developed our immigration pathway is with respect to other Caste communities.

**Figure 19: FirstGeneration Learners in Each Caste Group**



**Figure 20: Beneficiaries of Affirmative Action in Countries of Origin**



This is further supported by this next chart which shows that Dalit American immigrants report some of the highest levels of first generation learning.

These educational achievements are extraordinary, especially considering the severe restrictions on access to education Dalits and Shudras continue to face in South Asia.

In explaining this, we point to historical conditions.

Both the relatively recent Dalit and Shudra waves of migration and educational attainment are most likely indicative of the democratizing outcomes of Affirmative Action schemes that have run in India for over 60 years. In India, Affirmative Action was instituted most robustly for people with Dalit, Adivasi and Caste-oppressed origins, in state-funded education and work in the 1950s through the 1990s. This has likely resulted in a powerful wave of upward social mobility for the most deprived in the nation.

The success of South Asian Affirmative Action programs in developing an educated and skilled labor force capable of migrating, is strongly supported by the fact that *over three-fourths of Dalits and almost half of Shudras stated that they themselves or their migrating family members were recipients of these programs.*

Since these programs are Caste-based, they have not been available to members of other Caste groups - Kshatriya, Brahmin and Vaishyas. And it is the only explanation for why Dalits have a such levels of educational attainment. This is surely an example of where policy can make the difference in the battle for equity in the face of injustices.

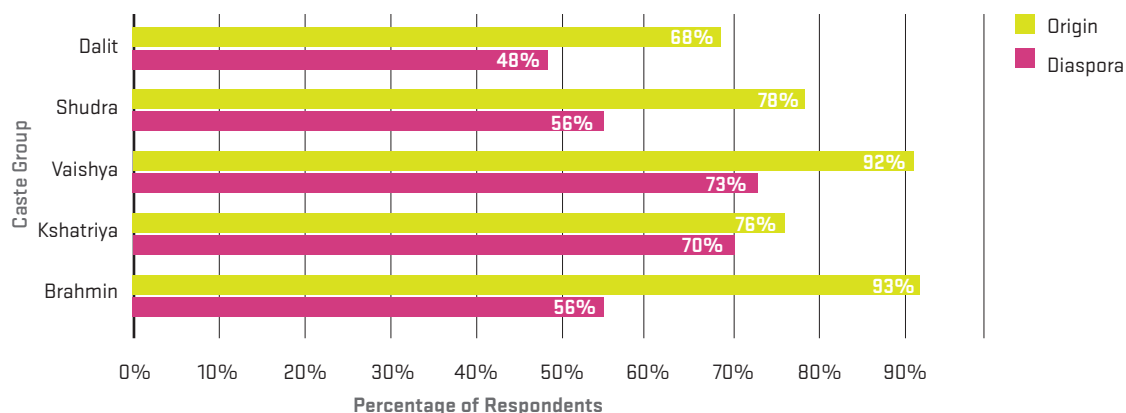
## Land and Property Ownership

Economic disparities in migrational beginnings become clear when one considers that “upper” Caste South Asians still own more land and property in South Asia when compared to their Dalit counterparts.

Results from this survey make it clear that this overall pattern of land and property ownership is still following Caste-ed patterns in the United States.

The unexpected shift observed is the decline in the ownership of land or property amongst the Brahmins in the diaspora. If there are significant sociological causes behind such a decline, but they remain to be investigated.

Figure 21: Land and Property Ownership Origin vs. Diaspora



Taking these observations together, it starts to become clear that socioeconomically, *Dalits* and *Shudras* are still communities on the pathway to established middle class lives.

At this point, it is also appropriate to note that, of the resources earned in the diaspora, significant portions may be re-invested in countries of origins through immigrant remittance strategies to support families who are dependent on and have heavily borrowed to invest in the immigration of their relatives to the United States. This is especially true of recent migrants and first generational learners and earners who are often *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, and *Shudras*.

This is bound to place an additional burden on the standards of living and financial opportunities available to the historically oppressed, even post migration, to the United States. For they are not earning, not just for themselves and their communities in the US, but they are earning for the whole of their families back home.

## Key Conclusions for Demographic Analysis



**Over 50%** of migrants arriving from 20-50 years ago were **Brahmins** and the “upper” **Castes**. These migrants have had a relative lead on **Dalits** and Caste-oppressed, most of whom are recent migrants, having arrived in America less than 20 years ago.



**Almost 50%** of **Dalits** and **Shudras** surveyed reported that their **education** attained is at the **postgraduate level**



**Over 30%** of **Dalits** in the diaspora are still **making \$24,999 or less a year** and are likely doing so because they are entering the immigration process as students.



**Over 75%** of **Dalits** and **and nearly 50%** of **Shudras** stated that they or their migrating family members **received Affirmative Action in their country** of origin and it **was a contributing factor to their migration**.



The **overall pattern of land and property ownership continues to be influenced by Caste even in the United States**.



## APPENDIX II

# Methodology In-Depth

Equality Lab's survey of Caste in the South Asian American diaspora is the first extensive study of Caste distribution and its effects in the United States.

Over a period of eight months, a team of Caste experts, anti-Caste activists, community members, and policy advocates came together to create the survey. In the eight months of dissemination, slightly over 1,500<sup>51</sup> people responded to the 47-question survey.

The online survey<sup>52</sup> was directed to all those in the United States diaspora identifying as “South Asian” - those having subcontinental heritage from present-day Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Trinidad/Tobago, Guyana, Fiji, Tanzania, and Kenya. It was open to people of different religious, political, tribal, and Caste affiliations.

Our team distributed the online survey through direct contacts, community listservs, community organizations, immigrant organizations, South Asian religious, cultural, and linguistic networks and social media.

We reached out to organizations and individuals via phone, text messaging, social media and/or e-mail. We asked several large South Asian organizations to email their constituents with the URL for the survey within the body of the email alongside a brief text orientation. We also distributed physical fliers in South Asian dense neighborhoods in cities in the East and West Coast. For some organizations with largely regional dialect speakers, for example around Punjabi-speaking Gurdwara membership, our fliers were translated to Punjabi.

We conducted regular calls and answered questions and concerns brought to us by respondents and potential respondents.

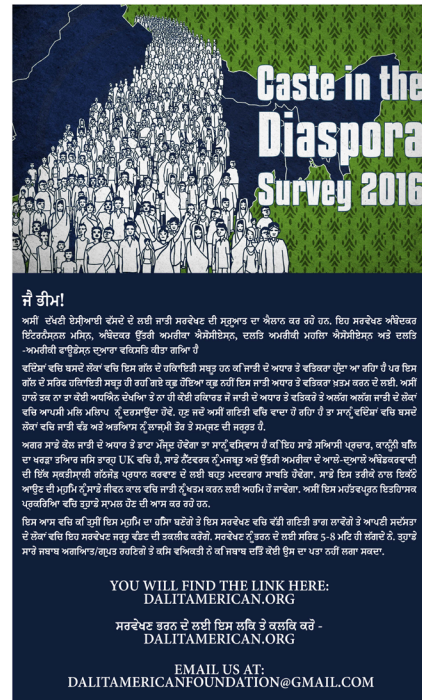


Figure 22: Sample Flyer Used

# Survey Development and Institutional Support

The following were the key goals in the framing of the survey questions <sup>53</sup>:

- To include all persons identifying as South Asians.
- To identify the Caste-based experiences of people in the United States diaspora while in the United States.
- To mine the stories of discrimination. We had already widely encountered anti-Caste activists in the diaspora.
- To keep the survey as short and user-friendly as possible. We estimated that our survey should not take more than 15 minutes to complete.

The survey was hosted at typeform.com and was endorsed by all the major anti-Caste organizations in the United States including the Dalit American Foundation, Ambedkar International Mission (AIM), Ambedkar Association of North America (AANA), and the Dalit-American Women's Association. The survey was also officially endorsed by the larger South Asian organizations in the United States, including South Asian Americans Leading Together, Associations for India's Development, Alliance for South Asians Taking Action, Indian American Muslim Council among others.

Initial survey testing was done on groups of five to ten focus group respondents with different backgrounds. Questions were adjusted according to the feedback we received.

## Survey Hurdles

During and after the collection of responses, we recognized several places where we could improve in future iterations of the survey.

- We need the survey translated to regional dialects for some communities.
- For certain communities, like Muslims, Christians, and people with roots in the colonially indentured South Asian communities in Africa, Fiji, and the Caribbean, the issues of Caste are not only complex and historically interlinked, but also deeply specific to their geographies. We learned that in order to best gather and represent information for these communities, we needed to use surveys targeted specifically to their community experience and not a more generalized survey such as this one.
- Some respondents refused to disclose their Caste identity even though this was the main task of the survey. This hurdle is further discussed in the data analysis sections.

## Data Analysis Methods

The first step was the “clean-up” of the data. In this stage, we eliminated the following responses:

- Incomplete and duplicate responses
- Responses that were intentionally illogical and misleading
- Responses from respondents who indicated that they had no South Asian heritage at all.
- We set aside responses from other diasporas (Europe, Africa etc.) for follow-up in another report.
- Eliminate responses from those who intentionally left their Caste identity blank (i.e. both Caste name and group).

## Further Cleaning Up Tasks Included:

- Matching open-ended long form answers in “Others”, “Please Explain” or “Additional Comments” with the rubric of the survey for example, if someone did not identify as having discriminated against a romantic partner because of Caste but mentioned the same in the long form answer.
- For respondents who stated their Caste names but did not know or identify which of the Caste groups (Brahmin, Vaishya, Kshatriya, Shudra, Dalit or Adivasi) they belonged to, we matched their Caste names to groups based on the scholarly records, census reports, and government gazettes.<sup>54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61</sup>
- Respondents who reported being of inter-Caste heritage were identified as the Caste group they had chosen themselves. Where they did not identify as a particular Caste group, the uppermost Caste group was assumed. For example, a person of Shudra and Dalit heritage was taken to be Shudra for the purposes of data analysis. If experiences specific to their Dalit heritage were stated in open-ended questions, these have been highlighted as meaningful.
- Respondents of inter-race heritage were identified by the Caste of their South Asian parent.

Taken together, our cleaning process reduced our sample size from an initial set of 1534 respondents to 1200 respondents.

After the initial cleaning up of responses, responses were tabulated to each question in the survey. Findings were presented in the form of percentages where each percentage has been normalized to the percent of respondents in each Caste group.

Throughout this report, we have rounded these percentages to whole numbers.

Caste group sample sizes for Adivasis, some Muslims, and indentured communities were too small to yield reliable results and therefore, anecdotal, and self-reported information is presented as a secondary means to represent their Caste-ed experiences in the diaspora.

In this version of the survey, we did not employ the use of statistical testing to establish the statistical significance of results, but we plan to do so in future iterations.

Anecdotal responses to open-ended questions have all been edited for grammar, spelling, and clarity. Where necessary, names, dates, and other identifying information have been redacted or changed to preserve confidentiality.

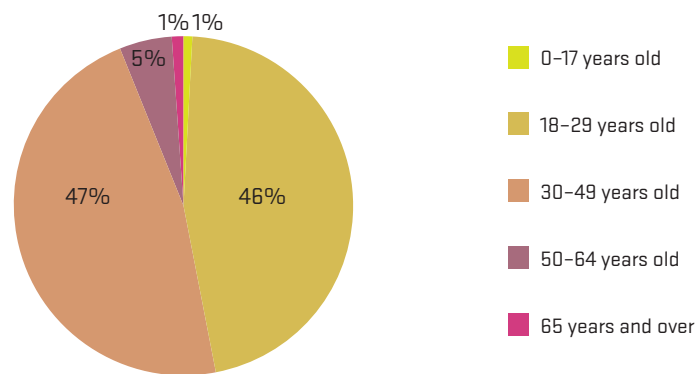
## APPENDIX III

# Distribution of Age, Gender and Sexual Orientation

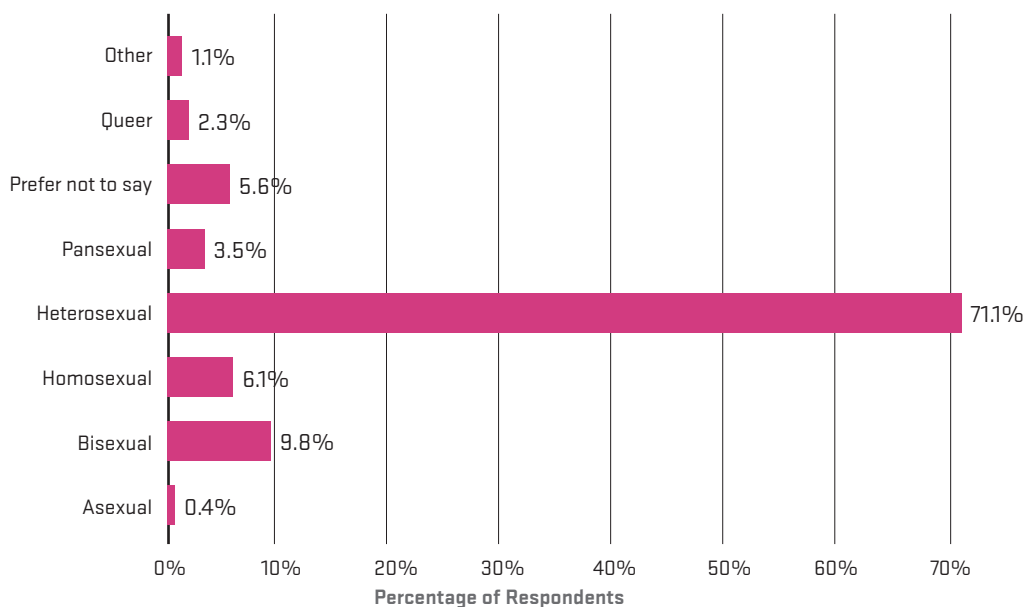
This information broken down by Caste group did not yield any notable variances and so they are presented as a whole.

Figure 23: Age, Gender and Sexual Orientation

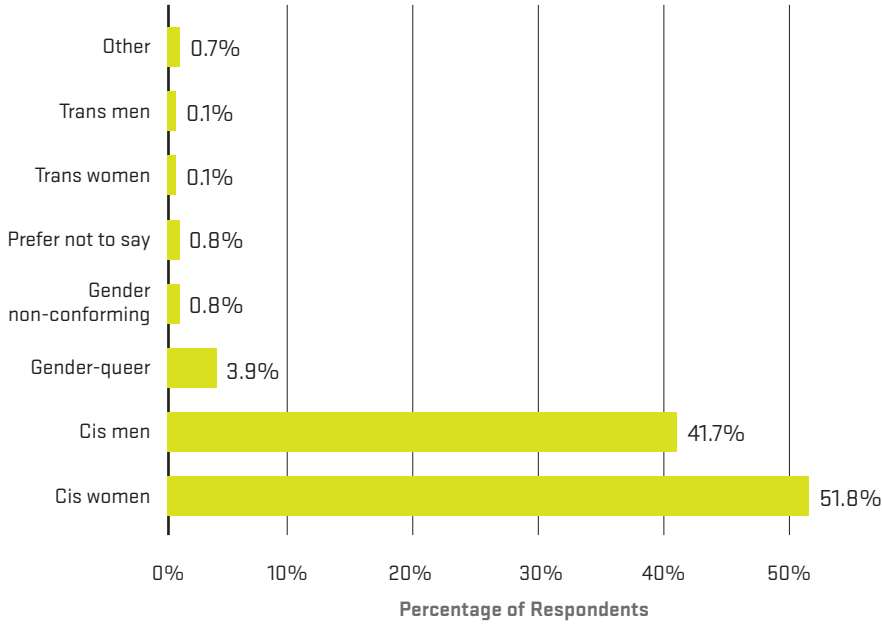
### AGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS



### SEXUALITY IDENTIFIERS OF RESPONDENTS



**GENDER IDENTIFIERS OF RESPONDENTS**





## APPENDIX IV

# Adivasi Responses

This survey could gather only 12 Adivasi responses. This number is too small to draw any conclusions from the data collected. Such a small number of responses may itself reflect that a very small number of Adivasi people have immigrated to the diaspora. Until we have a more robust survey of Adivasi experiences in the diaspora, these 12 responses are significant in themselves and some have been presented here.

| <b>Survey Question (Total of 12 respondents)</b>  | <b># of Adivasi Respondents Answering Yes</b> |
|---|---|
| Are you the first generation to have access to education in your family?  | 4   |
| Does your family own land/property in your country of origin?   | 3   |
| Does your family own land/property in the diaspora?   | 1   |
| Prior to immigration, did you or your family utilize Affirmative Action policies in your country of origin?     | 4   |
| Have you or your family worried about your social networks in the diaspora finding out about your Caste?        | 8   |
| What is your food preference - answering vegetarian?  | 2   |
| While in the diaspora have you been treated unfairly at school because of your Caste?                           | 2   |
| While in the diaspora have you been refused or given poor service at a place of business because of your Caste? | 2   |
| While in the diaspora have you been treated unfairly at a workplace because of your Caste?                      | 7   |
| While in the diaspora have you been threatened or physically attacked because of your Caste?                    | 1   |

## APPENDIX V

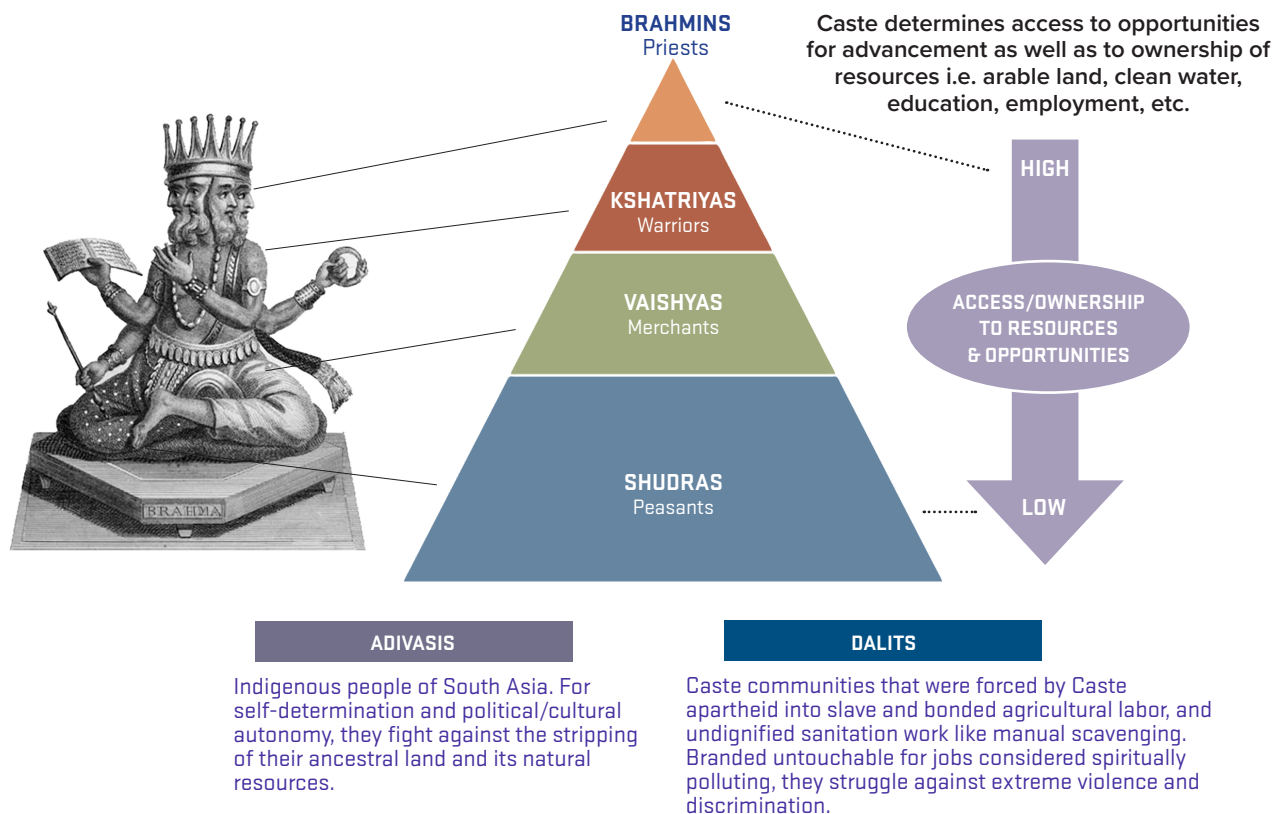
# Resources for Teachers

## Caste FAQs

### 1. What is the Caste pyramid?

The Caste pyramid is the most powerful visual tool for teaching about Caste Apartheid in South Asia.

We recommend this graphic in particular because it links the religious origins of Caste, the structure of the social hierarchy, and the socioeconomic imbalances resulting from it.



## 2. Where does the word “Caste” come from?

The word “Caste” itself stems from the Spanish and Portuguese “*casta*”, which means “race, lineage, or breed.”<sup>62</sup> It was applied by white colonials during the 17th century C.E. to refer to the system of social codification they witnessed existing in South Asia. The native terms for Caste are often “*varna* (Caste group)” and *jati* (Caste)”.

Caste is a word used in several contexts around the world. In Europe, it has signified status related to closeness to royalty and class. In the Americas, Caste has been used to quantify whiteness in mixed race peoples as well as present day class hierarchies.

However, the term used in the South Asian context is distinct and is defined by one of the oldest persisting systems of oppression, manifesting even today, as an apartheid directly affecting over 300 million people.

## 3. How do South Asians identify each other’s Caste?

To a non-South Asian person, it may be difficult to understand how people identify one another’s Caste. While not always obvious, there are several identifiers.

People may directly interrogate each other on what Caste the other belongs to. However, even when not asked or disclosed outright, a person’s Caste can be identified through the following:<sup>63</sup>

- **Last name** - Many South Asian last names are, in fact, their Caste names. This is often the strongest indicator of one’s Caste location.
- **Food Preferences** - Many vegetarians are “upper” Castes and Caste-oppressed people are not. Many Dalits and Adivasis, in addition to being non-vegetarian, also uniquely cook and consume beef.
- **The name of their native hometown in South Asia** - Because living spaces can be segregated by Caste, a particular name of a town or region can be telling of your Caste.
- **Skin color** - Racial and ethnic mixing in South Asia has a complex history and Caste does not map directly to race. However, many Caste-oppressed peoples are perceived to be darker in skin color than “upper” Caste people from the same region.
- **Religion** - Many Muslim, Christian, Buddhists, and Sikhs are people whose communities have adopted these religious beliefs to escape Caste oppression in Hinduism. Therefore, your religious affiliation can indicate your Caste location.
- **Family and social affiliations** - People of all Castes can have strong and identifiable ties to their Caste community through their families and social circles.

## 4. How is Caste related to Class?

It is important to understand that because of the way Caste has historically divided up access to resources, class in South Asian communities is deeply interlinked with Caste. Many Caste-oppressed peoples therefore, do not come from wealth and often trace back to lower-class or middle-class upbringings. However, like race, Caste and class do not directly map onto each other. For example, consider that a lower Caste person can acquire wealth and move up the class ladder, but can never change their Caste location.

## 5. Is Caste just a Hindu problem?

Despite its roots in Hinduism, Caste is by no means just a Hindu problem. South Asian Muslims, Sikhs and Christians all practice forms of Caste that have imbibed Hindu concepts and intermingled them with their own religious beliefs and historical roots. Caste group structure can look very different for these communities and often don't correspond to the Four-Caste group structure. These Caste dynamics warrant in depth follow-up studies.

## Other Resources - Articles:

What is India's Caste System? (2017, July 20). *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>

Soundararajan, T., and Varatharajah. S., Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged. *The Aerogram* (2015). Retrieved from <http://theaerogram.com/caste-privilege-101-primer-privileged/>

Karunakaran, V., A Dalit-Bahujan Guide to Understanding Caste in Hindu Scripture. *Medium* (2016). Retrieved from [https://medium.com/@Bahujan\\_Power/the-dalit-bahujan-guide-to-understanding-caste-in-hindu-scripture-417db027fce6](https://medium.com/@Bahujan_Power/the-dalit-bahujan-guide-to-understanding-caste-in-hindu-scripture-417db027fce6)

Munshi. K., The Impact of Caste on Economic Mobility in India (2017, July 20). *Livemint*. Retrieved from <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/FLn6TiQPArQZUN9LE2ZsM/The-impact-of-caste-on-economic-mobility-in-India.html>

Pandit, E., There's a New Battle Raging in California Over History Textbooks. Here's What You Need to Know. Retrieved from [https://www.salon.com/2016/05/16/theres\\_a\\_new\\_battle\\_raging\\_in\\_california\\_over\\_history\\_textbooks\\_heres\\_what\\_you\\_need\\_to\\_know/](https://www.salon.com/2016/05/16/theres_a_new_battle_raging_in_california_over_history_textbooks_heres_what_you_need_to_know/)

Soundararajan. T., The Black Indians: Growing up Dalit in the US, Finding Your Roots, Fighting for Your Identity (2012). *Outlook*. Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-black-indians/281938>

## Other Resources - Books and Papers:

Mani, Braj Ranjan. *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. Manohar Publishers, 2005.

Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. Vol. 1. *Soft Group*, India, 2016.

Chandola, M. Varn. "Affirmative Action in India and the United States: The Untouchable and Black Experience." *Ind. Int'l & Comp. L. Rev.* 3 (1992): 101.

Schwartz, Barton M., ed. *Caste in Overseas Indian Communities*. Chandler Publishing Company, 1967.

## APPENDIX VI

# Survey Questions

1. What is your age? \*

- A : 0-17 years old
- B : 18-29 years old
- C : 30-49 years old
- D: 50-64 years old
- E: 65 years and over

2. Which city do you live in the diaspora\*?

\*Please name the city in the country you immigrated to

3. What is your gender identification? \*

You may choose “Other” to type in your specific response.

- A: Female
- B: Male
- C: Gender-queer
- D: Prefer not to say
- E: Other

4. Which of the terms best describes your sexual orientation? \*

You may choose “Other” to type in your specific response.

- A: Heterosexual
- B: Gay/lesbian (or “Homosexual”)
- C: Bisexual
- D: Pansexual
- E: Prefer not to say
- F: Other

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed? \*

You may choose “Other” to type in your specific response.

- A: High School
- B: 4-year College
- C: Trade/Technical/Vocational Training
- D: Graduate School
- E: Post-Graduate
- F: Other

6. Which of the following best describes your employment or study? \*

Community and Social Service  
Cleaning and Maintenance  
Education, Training, and Library  
Healthcare Support

Production

Sales

Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Life,

Physical, and Social Science

Legal

Management

Computer and Mathematical Farming, Fishing, and

Forestry

Business and Financial Operations Personal Care  
and Service

Protective Service

Construction and Extraction

Arts, Design, Entertainment, Media Sports

Architecture and Engineering Office and

Administrative Support

Food Preparation and Serving

Healthcare Practitioners and Technical

Transportation and Materials

Other

7. Which category best describes your annual household income? \*

- A: Less than \$24,999
- B: \$25,000 to \$49,999
- C: \$50,000 to 99,999
- D: \$100,000 to \$249,999
- E: \$250,000 or more

8. What is your or your family’s place of origin in South Asia? \*

If your place of origin is not listed, you may state it under the “Other” option.

Choose as many as you like.

- A: India
- B: Pakistan
- C: Nepal
- D: Sri Lanka
- E: Afghanistan
- F: Bhutan
- G: Bangladesh
- H: Myanmar
- I: Other

9. What religion does your family identify as? \*

If your religion is not listed, you may state it under the “Other” option. You may also choose more than one option.

Choose as many as you like

- A: Atheist/Agnostic
- B: Buddhist
- C: Christian
- D: Hindu
- E: Jewish
- F: Jain
- G: Muslim
- H: Sikh
- I: Other

10. Do you share this religious preference? \*

Yes  
No

11. If you said No, please state your own religious preference.

You may choose more than one option. If your religious preference is the same as your family’s, you may skip this question.



12. What is your or your family's diasporic country?

Diasporic location refers to the country you immigrated to. If your location is not listed, you may state in under the "Other" option.

A : Guyana  
B : Australia  
C : Kenya  
D : United Kingdom  
E : Singapore  
F : Trinidad and Tobago  
G : Malaysia  
H : Fiji  
I : UAE  
J : Belgium  
K : Zambia  
L : South Africa  
M : Bahrain  
N : Germany  
O : Qatar  
P : Tanzania  
Q : France  
R : Zimbabwe  
S : United States  
T : Mauritius  
U : Kuwait  
V : Canada  
W : Oman  
X : Saudi Arabia  
Y : Uganda  
Z : Other

13. Are you the first generation to migrate to the diasporic country? \*

A: Yes  
B: No  
C: Other

14. When did you or your family first immigrate to the diasporic country? \*

A: 1-5 years ago  
B: 6-10 years ago  
C: 11-20 years ago  
D: 21-50 years ago  
E: 50-100 years ago  
F: More than a 100 years ago

15. What is the name of your Caste? \*

Please state the specific name of the Caste to which you belong. Caste cuts across religious and geographical backgrounds. For example, to see how Caste operates in South Asian Islamic communities, please see - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste\\_system\\_among\\_Muslims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_among_Muslims) .

Some example responses are: Iyer, Mahar, Syed, Bagdi, Yadav, Kamma, Julaha, Qureshi, Chettri, Newar, Syrian Christian, Latin Christian, Berava, Navandanna, Govigama, Agamudaiyar, Bhagobenees, Rishi, Tele, Namashudra etc.

16. Is your Caste name your last name? \*

Yes  
No

17. Which Caste group does your Caste fall under?

If you choose "Other", you may type in your response.

A: Brahmin  
B: Kshatriya  
C: Vaishya  
D: Shudra  
E: Dalit /Scheduled Caste  
F: Adivasi/ Scheduled Tribe  
G: Ashraf  
H: Ajlaf  
I: Arzral  
J: Other

18. Are both your parents of the same Caste? \*

Yes  
No

19. If you chose NO, what is each parent's individual Caste?

20. Which of the following best describes your political leanings with respect to the diasporic country? \*

Diasporic country refers to the country you immigrated to. If other, please state next to your selection.

A: Left  
B: Center  
C: Right  
D: Other

21. Which of the following best describes your political leanings with respect to your country of origin. \*

A: Left  
B: Center  
C: Right  
D: Other

22. Are you the first generation to have access to education in your family?

Yes  
No

23. Does your family own land/property in your country of origin?

Yes  
No

24. Does your family own land/property in the diasporic country? \*

Diasporic location refers to the country you immigrated to.

Yes  
No

25. How important is Caste to your family in your country of origin? \*

Please rate from 1 to 5, where 1 is "Not at all Important" and 5 is "Very Important"

26. Prior to immigration, did you or your family utilize Reservation (Affirmative Action) policies to gain access to employment or educational opportunities in your country of origin? \*

Choose as many as you like  
A: Yes

B: No  
C: Other

27. Do the persons in your South Asian social networks largely fall into the same Caste/Caste group as yourself. \*

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5.

1 = Not at all, people in my social network are of many different Castes

5 = Yes people in my social network are all my Caste

28. Are people of South Asian origin in your professional networks of the same Caste/Caste group as yourself? \*

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5.

1= No, they are from various Caste

5 = Yes, they are the same Caste as me

29. While in the diaspora, have you ever rejected a romantic partnership because of his or her Caste?\*

You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

A: Yes

B: No

C: Other

30. While in the diaspora, have you been rejected by romantic partners because of your Caste? \*

You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

A: Yes

B: No

C: Other

31. Are you in favor of Reservation (Affirmative Action) policies allowing marginalized Caste populations increased access to education or jobs?\*

Yes

No

32. What is your food preference? \*

You may use the other option to describe your food preference if not listed.

A: Vegetarian

B: Non-Vegetarian

C: Other

33. Would you say your food preferences are a result of your Caste culture? \*

Yes

No

34. Do you think that Caste has determined your physical appearance? \*

Yes

No

35. Do you think your Caste has determined your family's economic background? \*

Yes

No

36. Have you or your family worried about your

friend and social networks in the diaspora finding out your Caste? \*

Diaspora refers to the country you immigrated to.

Yes

No

37. On immigrating to your diasporic country, did you or your family access your Caste community for help regarding housing/school/employment? \*

Yes

No

38. Have you been subjected to Caste slurs or Casteist jokes in the diaspora? \*

You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No

Other

39. Have you been threatened or physically attacked because of your Caste in the diaspora? \*

You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No

Other

40. While in the diaspora, have you been denied leadership positions in a place of worship because of your Caste? \*

You can use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No

Other

41. While in the diaspora, have you been made to feel unwelcome at a place of worship because of your Caste? \*

You can use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No

Other

42. While in the diaspora, have you been refused service or been given poor service at a restaurant or place of business because of your Caste? \*

You can use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No

Other

43. While in the diaspora, have you been treated unfairly at school because of your Caste by your fellow students? \*

You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes

No  
Other

44. Is there is anything else would you like to add with regards to Caste experience in the school.

45. While in the diaspora, have you been treated unfairly at a workplace because of your Caste? \*  
You may use the "Other" option for additional remarks.

Choose as many as you like

Yes  
No  
Other

46. To what extent do you believe Caste to be practiced in your diaspora? \*

Please rate from 1 to 5 where 1 is "not at all present" and 5 is "very much present"

47. Do you have any other comments regarding your Caste experience in the diaspora?

# Notes and References

1. **Caste:** A system of religiously sanctioned social division in India by which people are ranked in a hierarchy based on birth. Caste is maintained by endogamy or marrying only persons within one's own Caste. Position within the Caste hierarchy determines your social and economic outcomes. See below for more.
2. **A demographic snapshot of South Asian Americans.** SAALT, South Asian Americans Leading Together. <http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Demographic-Snapshot-Asian-American-Foundation-2012.pdf>
3. **Dalits**, also formerly known as the "untouchables" are people outside of the Caste System, who are seen as spiritually and physically polluting to Caste-ed Hindus.
4. **Adivasis** are the Indigenous people of the South Asian subcontinent
5. See Appendix III (Resources for Teachers) for more.
6. Perceval, Richard, and John Minsheu. *A dictionary in Spanish and English*. Latham.
7. Karve, Irawati. **What is Caste?** Economic Weekly 10.4 (1958): 5.
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  38. A more detailed version of the methods used in this survey can be found in Appendix I
  39. <http://www.Castesurvey.org/>
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